

## put your arms around me (and i'm home) by FateChica

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**Summary:**

el's back, but she's not *here*. instead, mike waits, waits for her to return...waits for her to *finally* come home.

## put your arms around me (and i'm home)

### Author's Note:

- For [EvieSmallwood](#).

Welcome to the start of my missing scenes series! I know, I know, I still have one chapter of "love you like a love song" left to go, but there's a *really* good reason for this...

And it's because it's my darling Ely's (aka EvieSmallwood) birthday!

Ely, dear, I know I said the most recent chapter was your birthday gift...but it was a lie. I already had this written and it took everything I had not to spoil the surprise. I hope you have the best, most fantastic birthday. Love you, boo! And I hope you enjoy the gift! \*all the hugs\*

Nov 4, 1984

*(during Chapter 2 of "love you like a love song")*

Mike can't stop pacing.

He can't help it. He's just a bundle of nervous energy - restless, rootless. He crosses his arms over his chest, hands tucked under his armpits, between the folds of the fabric of his dirty hoodie in an attempt to ground himself. But all it manages to do is stop his arms from shaking.

He's still pacing, still restless.

*He just needs her.*

"Dude, will you sit the fuck down? You're making me dizzy."

Mike turns to look at Max, eyes narrowing as he looks at her. She's sitting between Lucas and Dustin on the couch, which is still pushed

up beneath the Byers' front windows, shattered glass and crayon-filled papers underfoot. He's still not sure about this new girl, this intruder who's been slotting into the space El left behind. *No one can replace El, though. No one.*

But Mike has to admit Max has been helpful tonight. From subduing Billy to braving the tunnels with the rest of them, she's been able to keep up and *more*. Maybe Mike's misjudged her. *Maybe.*

Still, he's not going to take orders from her. "Shut up," he mutters, mostly under his breath.

"Wait, *what* did you say?" Max's voice is indignant, tinged with exhaustion. They're *all* tired and tempers are short.

"Max, just leave him alone," Lucas says, trying to be the peace maker. He sighs heavily. "Just...El's still out there."

Max huffs out a sigh, frowning. "Yeah, I guess...." she says, voice trailing off weakly.

It's been almost an hour since they got back to Will's house, Steve managing to drive them there and get them back inside before passing out in the armchair. And there's been no sign from anyone since.

Mike's a bundle of anxiety, drive without purpose, just *waiting*.

All he's done is wait, though. 353 days worth of waiting (or is it more? How long has it been since he called El? How long has he gone without the piece of him that's missing?).

Mike just needs El back in front of him, whole and healthy. He needs her so much it almost makes him sick.

Mike sees her, flashes of memory assaulting him. Walking through that door, all white knight without a trusty steed, ready to do battle, to protect her friends. Falling into his arms as he hugs her, the sweetest relief washing through him as she hugs him back, there and alive and *real*. Standing in front of him on the porch, telling him, *promising* him, that she'll be fine, that she'll come back, leaning in, her face inches from his, is *she*...?

Mike squeezes his eyes shut, the memories taunting him, weighing on his heart. She has to be ok. She *has* to. Anything else is just... unacceptable.

The sound of a car's tires crunching down the gravel sounds through the shattered windows. And Mike's heart leaps into his throat. *El*.

The only one on his feet, Mike lunges for the door, like off the starting block after the shot. Hope tangles wildly in his chest, in the thump of his heart, the tightness of his lungs. *Please, oh please* as he opens the door, steps out onto the porch...

Only to see Jonathan's car rolling up the driveway, Nancy in the front seat, a bundle of figures in the back. *Will*.

Tears burn hot in Mike's eyes and a complex war of emotions takes place inside his chest as he watches the car open and everyone spill out, Jonathan carrying Will inside, Will insisting that he can walk, even if his voice is weak.

There's relief that Will's alive, back to whatever passes for normal from the way he's talking. There's guilt, guilt that Mike was so focused on El that he almost completely forgot about Will. But, most of all, there's disappointment, profound and aching. Because El's not back. Because he doesn't know if she's going to be.

And she has to, she just *has* to. He's just started *believing* again, after so long of hoping without hope. The world can't be that cruel to him, giving El back only to take her away again.

No, Mike can hope for a little while longer. He did it for almost a year on faith alone. This should be easy compared to that.

But it's not, and Mike knows it. Not when El's in danger, not when so much is up in the air, not when the stakes have never been higher.

Mike stands, immobile, frozen, as Will and the others move past him into the house, only to jump when Nancy stops and grabs him by the arm. "Mike? Are you ok? You're *filthy*."

Yeah, he's pretty gross. It's been a couple days since he's changed clothes or showered. And that was *before* his little trip down to the

subterranean tunnels to burn the shit out of the Mind Flayer's hub.

But he doesn't need *Nancy* to tell him that and Mike shrugs her hand off his shoulder, trying to go for *cool* (but accomplishing only *prickly* instead). "Yeah, m'ok," he mumbles. "Did...did everything go ok?"

Nancy's still eyeing him, curious and questioning and all irritating concern. "Yeah, a little touch and go for a bit and – oh my *god*, is that *slime*?"

Mike looks to where she's looking, the outer curve of his arm, and he rotates his shoulder, craning his neck to see. "Uh...maybe?"

Nancy levels a look at him. "Michael Theodore Wheeler," she breathes and, *oh my god*, she's channeling Mom. "What *happened*?"

Mike looks down, scuffing his toe on the wood grain beneath him, hearing the rustle of his sole against the boards. "We needed to help," he says before launching into the short version of the past couple of hours – Billy and Max driving and the tunnels and the fire and Steve protecting them all the while.

Nancy's looking at him with a pinched expression, her hair matted with sweat, curls sticking to her forehead. "*Mike*," she says, hand coming up to her forehead, thumb and middle finger smoothing down over her eyebrows to press at her temples.

"Don't 'Mike' me," he says, indignation rising hot inside of him. "I couldn't just *stay* here and do nothing. Not when El-" Mike clamps down on his lips immediately, trapping the words that could threaten to expose *everything*. And he's not ready, not ready to admit just how much he's missed El, not ready to admit the depth of the feelings inside of him, not even to himself. And *certainly* not to Nancy.

So he glares at her, challenging, gaze unwavering as he stares at her. Nancy stares back – there's the infamous Wheeler stubbornness, right there – before she sighs, softening a bit. "You missed her, didn't you? Eleven?"

Mike crosses his arms over his chest, hugging himself, feeling his shoulders hunch over. He wants to say "no", wants to deny – it's all

he's been doing, it feels like, denying and pushing and old habits die hard – but he can't, he just *can't*. It would be a lie and, well...*friends don't lie*.

"Yeah," he says, unable to keep looking at Nancy. The word sticks in his throat, thick and sour, and Mike feels his lower lip tremble. But he's not going to cry, he just *isn't*. He's done enough of that, he thinks with sharp, hot embarrassment.

"Oh, Mike," Nancy says, breathing the words. Mike feels Nancy step closer to him, feels her arms encircle him. And though Mike doesn't unwrap his arms from around his own torso, he leans into her touch, her warmth. It threatens to undo him, but Mike can't pull away.

They stand there, Nancy trying to comfort, Mike resisting if only out of self-preservation – *if he gives in now, he'll lose it and never find it again* – until who knows how long has passed.

Nancy pulls back, but not away, her hands on his shoulders. "Come on, it's cold out here. Let's wait inside, yeah?"

Mike turns to look. Will's front door is still open, the window still broken, light spilling out onto the porch, carrying with it the sounds of everyone else inside – Mrs. Byers' raspy concern, the Party's tired exuberance, Jonathan's quieter patience. Part of Mike knows he should go inside – should go check on Will, should go help clean up – but he can't. There are plenty of people who can wait inside, who can help Will and Mrs. Byers. But what about El? Who's going to wait, to be there for *her*?

So Mike turns back to Nancy and shakes his head. "No, I'm gonna wait out here. I'm gonna wait for...I'm just, I – I'm gonna wait here."

Nancy sighs, looking all concerned again. "But, what if they don't come back here? What if-?"

"Then I'll figure something out, Nancy!" Mike barks, yanking away out from under Nancy's grip, wrenching her hands away from his shoulders.

Nancy just stares at him for a second, lips pursed and folded. She has

something she wants to say, Mike *knows* it, all big sister concern and Nancy-knows-best – god, that’s so annoying, she’s only a few years older than he is, what makes her think she knows *everything*?

Thankfully, she doesn’t say it, whatever it is. Instead, she just sighs and nods. “Ok. I’ll go get you a blanket or something. Still cold out here.”

Nancy gets a couple of steps way, one foot just over the threshold, and Mike calls out to her, needing to say something. “Nancy?”

Nancy pauses, one hand on the doorway, and turns to look back at him. “Yeah?” The concern is back, paired with curiosity.

Mike smiles, or tries to – his heart is beating too fast, too worried, and every nerve hurts with anxiety. “Thanks,” he says, the word coming out in a croaking squeak.

Nancy smiles back, soft and understanding. “Any time.”

A couple of minutes later, Mike is settled on the porch swing, knitted throw draped over his lap. All the energy that once fueled his pacing is now diverted into pushing himself back and forth on the swing while he picks at his fingers. He can’t look away from the driveway - like if he stares hard enough, he’ll be able to summon the Chief’s Blazer out of thin air, carrying El back home.

Back to him.

The Wheelers aren’t really a churchgoing family – his parents had tried to instill some sense of piety in their children, dragging Nancy and Mike to church when they were younger, but it didn’t take and now it’s just their dad who goes every Sunday – and yet, Mike suddenly finds himself praying. Praying to a god he doesn’t believe in. Praying to *any* benevolent higher power that might be listening.

*Please, let her be ok. Please, let her be safe. Please, let her come back home.*

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Mike hears the Blazer before he sees it.

Mike rushes to his feet, blanket falling over his shoes. He kicks it free and steps over it, hand going to clutch at one of the posts that holds up the awning. Every muscle in his body tenses up as he sees Hopper's Blazer pull up the driveway, gravel crunching beneath the tires. *El.*

He can scarcely breathe as the Blazer comes to a halt only feet away, the noise of the parking brake locking into place sounding too loud for his ears as the engine cuts off. Anticipation, sick and filled with worry, has invaded him and Mike finds he can't move.

So he just watches as Hopper gets out of the car. Weariness pulls at every inch of the older man, his steps plodding and shuffling. Hopper meets his eyes for just a brief second, the look in his eyes unreadable, before he goes around to passenger door.

The second El comes into view, cradled in Hopper's arms, air suddenly comes rushing back into Mike's lungs. *She's here. She's **back**.* Until he notices that she's not moving, that she's too pale beneath the porch light.

And everything shrivels and dies inside of him.

*No.*

The hand clutching the wooden post is the only thing keeping Mike upright as dizziness sweeps through him, blackness folding in around the edges of his vision, his world turning grey. *No, no, no, no....*

Tears gather along the lower line of his eyelashes, his lip quavering with too much emotion. "Is—" He can't get any other word past his lips as the Chief walks towards him, El hanging limply from his arms.

But Hopper smiles at him, a small, compassionate smile that's at odds with the rest of his gruff demeanor. "She'll be fine, kid. Just sleeping. Closing the gate took a lot out of her."

All the colors come rushing back in and the relief that floods him



threatens to buckle his knees. *Sleeping, she's just sleeping. She's gonna be ok.*

"Oh," is all Mike can say.

"You wanna get the door for me?" Hopper says. "As you can see, arms are kinda full."

Mike's eyes widen and he rushes ahead of Hopper, hands trembling as he opens the door in his eagerness to help. Anything for El, *anything*. He practically trips over his own two feet as he rushes inside to get out of the way, unable to tear his eyes away as Hopper carries El inside and goes over to the couch. Dustin's sitting on it, cleaning up the papers and other detritus that are scattered underfoot. "Move," Hopper says, commanding.

Dustin looks up, jaw dropping. "El? She's ok? She did it?"

Hopper reaches out with his foot, nudging none-too-gently at Dustin's legs. "Kid, I'm not gonna ask again."

Dustin's eyes widen. "Oh, right, *right*. Sorry," he says as he scrambles to his feet, hands going to his hat as he watches Hopper lay El down.

"Guys!" Dustin yells, turning his head only enough to call out over his shoulder. "The Chief's back! And he has El!"

Suddenly, the living room is crowded, everyone rushing to see Hopper and El, a million questions on everyone's tongues. Mike is standing right next to Hopper and it's like there might as well not be anyone else in the room as he stares down at El. His heart feels like it's going to beat its way straight out of his chest. She's here, she's really *here*.

"Ok, alright!" Hopper yells, loud enough to be heard over everyone. "One at a goddamn time. And not in this room. She's sleeping, ok? I don't want any of your yapping to wake her up. So, the kitchen. *Now*."

Everyone files out, but Mike stays behind. He doesn't care about what anyone has to say, about whatever questions and answers are about to be discussed. El closed the gate and she came back. That's all that

matters to him.

He's trembling as he takes the short handful of steps over to the couch, sitting down on the edge of the cushions so that his hip is pressed against El's. He can feel the warmth of her against him and a piece of his heart clicks into place.

Mike just stares at her, drinking her in. Blood is caked along her face, beneath her nose, a little from her ears, mixing with dirt and smudged eye makeup. The lines of her veins are stark around her eyes, her forehead, all dark with blood beneath skin that's a little too pale. And her hair – *god, her hair*, will he ever get used to it? – is a mess, the gel that slicked it back half-gone, strands falling whichever way, some curling at the ends. All in all, she's a mess.

And Mike has never seen anyone, *anything* more beautiful in his entire life.

“Here,” Hopper says and Mike turns in time to see the Chief handing over a wet washcloth. “For her face.”

Mike looks up at Hopper as he takes the washcloth in a weak hand, feeling so small under the Chief's almost inscrutable gaze. He's suddenly very aware that he cried like a baby in front of Hopper not a few hours ago, embarrassment crawling inside of him, making him feel like a little kid again.

But Hopper's looking down at him, almost expectantly, and Mike realizes what it is a second later. *He's asking Mike to help take care of El.*

Suddenly, his heart feels too full and Mike gulps as he nods.

Hopper reaches out and ruffles Mike's hair. “Good kid,” he says, voice low, before he goes back into the kitchen where everyone else still is, talking and chattering in low-ish tones.

But Mike tunes them out as he turns back to El. He scoots up the couch so that he's closer to her face, his hip touching the bottom of her ribcage, and he can't stop the way his hands shake as he reaches for her, gently - so gently - dragging the washcloth along her skin.

And, if Mike's fingers brush against the skin of her cheek, the curve of her jaw, the slope of her nose, each touch dancing like floating fire up his arms and straight to his heart, no one is there to notice.

Slowly, gently, Mike wipes El's face free of blood, dirt, and makeup, revealing healthy, pink skin beneath it all, unveiling the girl who haunts his dreams, who exists in every waking thought. She's a little older, now, but so is he and Mike mourns the lost time as he reaches for one of the loose curls that's broken almost completely free of the gel, wrapping it around his finger, running his thumb over the soft strands.

*Curly. Who knew?*

The thought brings a smile to Mike's face, and he's almost on the edge of crying.

Because she's *here* and *real*, where he can touch her and look at her and be next to her. And it's so unbelievable, it hurts.

Tears gather in a lump right in the middle of his throat, but Mike swallows to keep them at bay. He sets the washcloth down on the ground and reaches for El's hand. She makes a noise as he wraps his fingers around her hand, palms pressed together, but she doesn't wake. Mike just sits there, looking at her, thumb caressing her hand along the line of her thumb, back and forth from the first knuckle to the edge of her wrist. Her skin's so soft beneath his touch, so warm. He never wants to leave her. He never wants to be without her again.

Mike's not sure how long he sits there, just staring at her. He's gone almost a year without seeing her and the sight of her is like an oasis to a man dying of thirst. And he drinks deeply, getting his fill, heart so full it's threatening to burst.

But, eventually, something touches his shoulder, drawing Mike from his reverie. He turns to look and sees Mrs. Byers standing next to him. Her hand's on his shoulder and she's bent over a bit to be closer to eye level. "Hi, sweetie," Mrs. Byers said, smiling softly. "Hop wants to put Eleven in Will's room so she can sleep somewhere other than the couch and everyone else is getting ready for bed in Jonathan's room. Did you want to take a shower before sleeping?"

Mike looks at her, a bit wide-eyed, exhaustion pulling at him with heavy hands. He nods, not entirely trusting his voice to speak for him. "Yeah, sounds good," he manages to croak out, one hand coming up to rub at his face, across his eyes.

Mike doesn't want to let El go, though. But he knows he has no choice as Hopper comes up and starts kneeling next to the couch, forcing Mike to get up and move away just by the sheer fact that Hopper is more than twice Mike's size and could squash him like a bug without a second thought.

So Mike can only watch as Hopper scoops El up into his arms and carries her out of the living room. It feels like there's a string connecting him to her, one that stretches painfully taut as Hopper walks away. Every inch of him begs for his feet to follow, but he's rooted in place, overwhelmed and exhausted.

Then he feels Mrs. Byers' hand on his shoulder again, pushing him in the direction of the bathroom. "Come on, Mike. I think there's something of Jonathan's that'll fit you. I'm sure you don't want to sleep in your dirty clothes."

It's true, he doesn't. Mrs. Byers manages to scrounge up a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt that belong to Jonathan – Will's clothes are too small for Mike, given the recent growth spurt he's gone under over the past few months - before shooing Mike into the bathroom.

Mike doesn't spend long in the bathroom. He wants to stand beneath the warm spray of the shower forever - all warm and relaxing, feeling like he's being reborn. But he's mindful that there are other people who probably want the chance to get clean, so Mike keeps it short, rushing through washing his hair, drying off as fast as he can before he emerges wearing his borrowed clothes, his own dirty ones left in a pile by the hamper.

And then he's settling down for bed, sleeping bag and pillow spread out across the floor in Jonathan's room. Soon the room is filled with the sounds of snoring, from Steve's wheezing breaths to Dustin's throaty snores to the softer, occasional sleepy sounds Nancy lets out from where she is on the bed.

But Mike's still awake. He's so tired, but he can't sleep. It's like he can feel El in the next room over, so close yet so far, and it *itches*, the distance between her and him.

Eventually, Mike can't take it anymore, the distance unbearable, the itch to be closer to her overwhelming. As quietly as he can manage, he slides out of the sleeping bag and then out of the room. He quickly peers around the corner into the living room where Hopper is sleeping on the couch, standing guard against whoever or whatever might be out there. *Mike just needs to be sure, just needs to check that Hopper is asleep, that he's not going to stop Mike from going to her. Hopper kept her from him once. Never again.* But Hopper hasn't stirred and Mike slips down the hallway, footsteps quiet against the worn carpeting, until he's at the door to Will's room.

Mike's heart leaps into his throat as his fingers curl around the doorknob, twisting and pushing, the door swinging open just enough for him to slip through the gap. He closes it quietly behind him, the quiet *snick* of the latch sounding way too loud for his own comfort. But then he looks across the room, sees the person occupying the bed, and nothing else matters.

El's only a handful of feet away and the rest of the world might as well not exist.

It's the easiest thing in the world, eliminating the distance between him and her. Like it's the natural order of the universe for him to be by her side.

Mike can't tear his eyes away from El as he sits down on the edge of the bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. El's asleep, curled up on her side, blankets pulled up to just above her waist. Hopper must have removed her jacket because she's just in a black muscle shirt, her arms bare, skin looking soft under the faint moonlight that streams in through the window. *Pretty.*

Not just pretty, though, but *beautiful*. So beautiful and alive and *here*.

Mike feels his lips tremble, feels the burn of tears in his eyes, and does nothing to stop them from falling this time. He sniffles softly in the quiet dark of the room, tears carving hot tracks down his cheeks,

and he's trying so hard not to sob.

But she's here, she's *really* here. And Mike can admit, for the first time, that he almost didn't believe he was going to see her again. He hoped - *oh*, how he hoped. He called to her every night, hoping she could hear him, hoping to be there for her in some small way, even if they were separated. But, all along, there was a part of him that never truly believed he'd ever see her, that she'd never come back to him.

And now that she has? Now that she's right in front of him, healthy and whole and alive? He can let himself *believe*. Believe in her, believe in himself, believe in a future that looks so, so much brighter than it did 12 hours ago, 6 hours ago. As long as he gets to stay by her side, the future can be nothing but blinding.

Still crying soft, quiet tears, Mike shifts and carefully lays down so that he's stretched out next to her, curled up as he faces her. She's inches away, hands curled loosely in front of her, face slack with sleep. Some of her hair has fallen over her face – *god, he's never going to get over this, is he?* – and Mike reaches out with a shaking hand to push it aside, the tip of one finger ghosting over the curve of her cheek.

El stirs a bit, smiling, but otherwise remains asleep. And Mike's heart feels like it's going to explode in fireworks of happiness. Hiccupping a bit, Mike wipes away at tears that are still drying on his face, still gathered in the corners of his eyes, before he lowers his hand. He reaches for her, his pinky wrapping loosely around hers, just needing to feel her touch, needing to anchor himself to her. He's been drifting for so long, untethered, lost at sea, and she's the only port he needs, the only home he ever wants.

Mike wants to lay there all night and just look at her, but sleep begins to gently drag him down, despite how he fights it. The adrenaline of the evening has long since run out and the relief of being whole once more, of having El near, of having her back, is just too much for him to handle.

So, Mike stops fighting and lets the sight of her lull him to sleep.

Mike counted the days they were apart, all 353 days worth of them. 353 days of reaching out without answer. 353 days of calling out into silence.

But that counter is reset now. And Mike can start counting the days for a different reason.

*El, it's me. It's Day 1. You're home, now. You're finally home.*

**Author's Note:**

So, I don't know when I'll get the next one of these out, but I'm sure it'll happen eventually. I hope you all enjoyed this!

(and, again, happy birthday, Ely!)